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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20510

December 17, 1984

LEGISLATIVE LIAISON
84-4827

The Honorable William J. Casey
 Director of Central Intelligence
 Central Intelligence Agency
 Washington, D.C. 20505

Dear Director Casey:

Attached are several articles recently published in the Detroit Free Press which raise many questions about whether U.S. military personnel have been engaged in activities in Central America to a far greater extent than the public and the Congress understand to be the case. Among other allegations, these articles included a claim that a member of the United States Armed Forces:

"...flew a bunch of trips into Nicaragua...He'd go somewhere and pick up a group of people in a clearing in the jungle--armed troops, speaking Spanish--and take them to another clearing in the jungle somewhere."

I would like to request that the Central Intelligence Agency investigate all of the allegations contained in these articles to determine whether they are true and whether, if so, the activities described were illegal, were in violation of the intent of Congress with respect to American activities in Central America, and/or were in violation of any Executive Branch regulations or Executive Orders.

I also would like to be informed whether any funds and/or personnel of the Defense Department and/or of the Central Intelligence Agency are being used to provide, directly or indirectly, military assistance, non-military aid, personnel, training, logistical support, coordination, and direction to contra forces in any way, publicly or privately, and/or through any other governmental or non-governmental department, agency or entity of any type.

In addition, I would like to be informed whether any U.S. personnel have at any time since January, 1982, crossed the borders of Nicaragua into that nation and/or violated the airspace or territorial waters of Nicaragua, and if so, under what conditions and authority and in what capacities.

My thanks in advance for your assistance.

Sincerely,



Carl Levin

CL/ss
 Attachments



TASK FORCE, from Page 1A

terrifying into action counter-terrorist units, such as the Delta Force.

The Reagan administration's desire to expand Special Operations Force units — those best suited for secret intervention in revolutionary struggles — has given the 160th other important tasks, said congressional and intelligence community sources.

One is testing new Army helicopter equipment and tactics. Another, the sources said, is the insertion and extraction of individuals and small commando units behind enemy lines.

He 'wanted to do something'

"Death waits in the dark," is their motto; their emblem a hooded warrior with starburst eyes, riding a winged horse, illuminated by a full moon.

With clumsy, imperfect night vision goggles to pierce the darkness, they look like moon men and came home — after up to six weeks away — with brows red and furrowed from the heavy gear strapped to their faces.

"Mark wanted to do something," said Matthew Rielly, whose brother, Sgt. Mark Rielly, 30, reportedly died around midnight on July 10, 1983, in the CH-47 Chinook helicopter with Tom Croghan and four others.

"He didn't want to be a grunt on a helicopter. He wanted to be on a special helicopter and do something different and if it was involved in secrecy and war it'd be right up his alley," recalled Matthew Rielly, a paramedic in Oceanside, Calif.

Mark Rielly, oldest of five children, was a surfer. "He was rowdy," his brother said. He once was picked up by a Coast Guard cutter for surfing too close to President Richard Nixon's home at San Clemente, just north of Oceanside.

The family figures that Mark Rielly's death may have killed his father. Walter Rielly — a retired Marine — had been looking at photos of his oldest boy's accident the night before his bad heart gave out.

The Army's secrecy about Mark's accident, in which his chopper was reported to be seven nautical miles off course when it sheared the tops off trees and exploded on South Fox Island, has his family wondering if the government is hiding something.

Secrecy shrouded task force

The 160th Task Force maintains such secrecy that:

- A colonel dressed down his underlings at the funeral home during Mark Rielly's wake, accusing them of divulging too much information, Rielly's family said. The family contends it knows virtually nothing about the crash.

- One task force member's widow, Brenda Jordan of Tampa, Fla., had to file a Freedom of Information Act request and pay \$289 in copying fees to read the Army's accident report and account of her husband's death. The father of another dead task force flier, Capt. Robert Brannum, 26, had to

file a similar request and pay \$154.95 for photographs of his son's UH60 Black Hawk helicopter accident near the Ft. Campbell airfield.

- The Albert Thompsons of Donnellson, Iowa, had to submit in writing their questions about their son, Richard's, fatal crash and wait from 24 hours to several weeks for Army replies. Maj. Larry Sloan, commander of Richard's company and pilot in the Black Hawk accident that killed him, declined to discuss the accident with Richard's parents, citing secrecy.

- Army officials confiscated film from news photographers in Grenada and Barbados who took pictures of the unit's aircraft and personnel during its involvement in the U.S.-led invasion of Grenada in October 1983.

- Investigations of the unit's crashes are kept secret even from personnel at the Army's Aviation Safety Center at Ft. Rucker, Ala., clearinghouse for crash and safety information. "I'm the chief of the research and analysis division and I don't see the 160th's accident reports because they're classified," said Sleigh Ricketson.

Task force fatality rate high

In 1983, 16 members of the 400- to 800-member 160th Task Force died, reportedly in four separate non-combat accidents. A 17th died in the invasion of Grenada while on a mission the Pentagon will not discuss. That is nearly half of the 35 aviation fatalities suffered by the 780,000-member Army in 1983, according to figures released by the Army Aviation Safety Center.

An investigation by the Free Press Washington Bureau of 160th Task Force fatal accidents suggests at least three reasons.

First, the unit trains realistically for dangerous missions, a hazardous practice. The Army said, two accidents occurred while pilots wore night vision goggles, which reduce depth perception and peripheral vision. It said, the other two accidents appear to have occurred as Chinook pilots were training for a difficult maneuver: towing and lowering a commando patrol boat into water.

After attempting the maneuver, which required precise, prolonged hovering just 25 yards above choppy seas, "I couldn't believe that sane people do this," Crossen wrote his friend Bartels, 36, an ex-helicopter pilot who served with him in Vietnam.

Second, maintenance of the task force's always-on-the-go helicopters apparently was shoddy. Arthur Childers of Washington, a nationally recognized helicopter safety expert was retained by the Free Press Washington Bureau to review unclassified portions of accident reports. He concluded, "If this is our elite force, they've got a lot of work to do and a long way to go."

Failure to fasten a rotor bolt on one Black Hawk — and the failure of two

supervisors to notice the oversight — caused three deaths at Ft. Campbell on a clear day on Aug. 28, 1983.

Childers, an Army helicopter pilot in Vietnam who testifies frequently in aviation negligence cases, called the 160th Task Force's maintenance procedure in that case, "the most improper procedure I've ever seen . . . just absolutely atrocious . . . the result of gross negligence on the part of the maintenance team."

"For the best unit in the world to have this kind of maintenance is absolutely absurd," Childers said.

The failure of a Chinook's rotor bushing contributed to five deaths, according to Army records, and has led to a lawsuit by survivors against Boeing Vertol Co. of Philadelphia, makers of the aircraft and drafters of its maintenance manual.

This may have been part of the unit's do-or-die style, Childers said, "but if that's leadership, it's the kind that leads them to fly right into the sides of mountains."

fatality rate could be deadly audacity. It may have led Crossen's crew to attempt its dangerous close-to-water maneuver, though, according to the Army, an important navigational aid was not working. And the crewman listed as navigator was, according to an Army report, inexperienced for that job.

Similarly, investigators of a reported Black Hawk crash offshore of Ft. Sherman, Panama, on Oct. 4, 1983, found that the enlisted man aboard as a substitute crew chief for the difficult night landing practice had only 35 hours of experience. Accident investigators recommended that a career soldier with a minimum of 500 hours of experience be assigned to similar jobs.

Childers said two accident investigations — those involving fatalities at Ft. Campbell and offshore of Norfolk leave no questions. "I wouldn't give you two cents for" the remaining two investigations, of crashes in Michigan and Panama, Childers said, based on the records he saw.

The Panama crash causes Childers the most problems, he says. In it, according to a partial accident report obtained by the Free Press Washington Staff, a senior instructor pilot failed for about 20 seconds to notice that his Black Hawk was falling seaward. The pilot he was training saw the descent on instruments but expected the instructor to take corrective action. A low-altitude alarm had been turned off.

The Black Hawk crashed into the Atlantic. The instructor is missing and presumed dead. The crew chief drowned. Both lacked life vests.

The trainee, however, wore one and, when he surfaced, found an inflated lifeboat with his gear bag and night vision goggles case inside it. The trainee was the then-commander of the Black Hawk company, Maj. Larry Sloan.

Childers said he saw Sloan's story as improbable. Finding the inflated raft with his bag was "a one in a million chance," he said. To find the gear and the goggle case, Childers said was "a billion to one shot."

Asked whether the pile-up of coincidences suggested that the accident might have been faked, Childers quickly replied, "I'm not going to touch that . . . I've never seen a made-up crash."

Among several of the 160th Task Force's widows, that remains a suspicion: that their men really died in clandestine combat somewhere and the Army conspired to keep the secret. The Free Press Washington Bureau found no evidence of this, though many questions remain.

Allen Jennings's widow, Linda, an Army veteran whose eight years of service included helicopter maintenance, called the boat-hauling tactic "piggy-backing." She said Night Stalker helicopters often were used to advance the piranha boats quickly while conserving their fuel.

As far as family members were concerned, the missions of their loved ones were full of danger and mystery.

JENNINGS, now a bank bookkeeper in Key West, Fla., said members of the 160th Task Force "never said where they were going and never talked about it with anyone in any place afterward. When they got together, they always seemed to make light of their worst fears. When they laughed, it wasn't heartfelt laughter but, 'Yeah, I know what you're talking about,' laughter."

"They made light about being lost and not coming back — and not knowing if what they were doing was right. There was no question that they were going, but they'd joke about having a gun behind the seat, just in case they got caught."

"Everybody took pet weapons with them — knives, machetes, something you could strap to your leg beneath your pants, something that wouldn't need oil and wouldn't rust. Back knives were real popular. One guy always took a Colt .45 in his duffel bag. It was all very real. There was no question that with this unit, you could get killed."

Jennings said it was not like training she had seen during her Army career.

CHINOOK CO-PILOT Alvey's father said his son carried a 9mm automatic and that a fellow crewman carried an Uzi submachine gun. The son also drew \$8,000 for bribe money, his father said, when he went on Central American missions.

"And his American Express card, he joked about that."

"I heard they were able to get bribe money from somebody," Jennings recalled.

Jennings and other relatives of Night Stalker soldiers said only civilian clothing was worn on Central American missions.

And, even in the United States, "Every time they got off the helicopter, they had to get off in civilian clothes," recalled Matthew Rielly, of Lencadia, Calif., brother of Sgt. Mark Rielly, who was killed, reportedly in a Chinook crash on July 10, 1983.

UNDER THE Geneva Conventions, civilian combatants who are not nationals of the countries at war can be considered mercenaries if captured. Mercenaries have no rights or protection as combatants or prisoners of war under the conventions, except to communicate their plight to their country.

Normally, units active in Central America would be commanded by Gen. Paul Gorman, commander in chief of the Army's Southern Command, based in Panama. Gorman has been "very, very positive" toward the use of special units in Central America, said Koch, the Pentagon's director of Special Operations forces.

It has been the administration's view, Koch said, that "Special Operations forces, properly applied and in the proper places, can prevent the spiral that eventually gets you involved in some larger conflict."

coming monday:

□ The stories of the "Night Stalkers" who died, possible reasons for their deaths, and the questions they left behind.

Secrecy followed task force members to their graves

Motto, 'Death waits in the dark,' came true for some

DETROIT FREE PRESS
12/17/84

Second of two parts

By ELLEN WARREN and FRANK GREVE
Free Press Washington Staff

WASHINGTON — Near the end, Army helicopter pilot Tom Crossan was scared, starting to feel that he wouldn't live forever after all.

First, it was his near miss. Then, it was watching one of the huge, lumbering choppers disintegrate in the Atlantic with five of his buddies aboard. He had awakened to what a dangerous business he was in.

"I couldn't believe that sane people do this," Crossan wrote in his last letter to his best friend, after a particularly hairy operation. "I was sweating like a cartoon character."

Three months later, Chief Warrant Officer Thomas Crossan III, 38, was dead. The \$4.2 million government machine he was piloting slammed into South Fox Island near Traverse City, Mich., the Army said.

Left behind were a father, a wife, an ex-wife, two kids, seven dogs, four cats, a mortgage on a modest white house that he'd lived in for 17 days, a \$100,000 life insurance policy and the best friend, Bob Bartels, who cried after Crossan died.

In 1963, Crossan and 16 of his comrades died.

Crossan was among the finest and — by all accounts — the most daring helicopter pilots in the world, a member of the Army's elite 160th Task Force, called the "Night

Stalkers." The story of Crossan, his comrades and their unit was pieced together from interviews with relatives, friends, military sources and records.

Night helicopter flight is risky. Flying in icy weather and storms can be gut-wrenching. Flying as low as possible, with treetops brushing the belly of the helicopter, or choppy seas blasting it with saltwater, severely tests pilots and their aircraft.

The 160th Task Force routinely flew missions in darkness and in storms, using the night and bad weather for cover and surprise.

One pilot at the unit's Ft. Campbell, Ky., base compared it to driving down "strange streets in the dead of night as fast as you could go with no lights."

It is not for everyone, perhaps not for anyone. One of the nation's top military helicopter safety experts, who examined partial reports of the unit's four 1963 fatal accidents, calls the 160th's maintenance program "atrocious" and is highly critical of the high-pressure training.

"Aces, daredevils, barnstormers, guys who flew by the seats of their pants, hot rodders, pilots who could pick it up, turn it around on a dime and put it back down with a flair."

That's what retired Army Col. Charlie Beckwith, then commander of the elite Delta Force, said he was looking for to transport his commandos. The 160th is best known for

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Army denies special unit report

WASHINGTON — A Pentagon spokesman said Sunday that U.S. military forces have not fought against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

The statement came in response to a report from the Free Press Washington Bureau that a U.S. Army helicopter unit had been involved in assisting pro-American forces in Central America. The report was based, in part, on interviews with relatives of unit members.

LT. COL. Robert Shields, a Defense Department spokesman, read a prepared statement that "no U.S. military forces have participated in any military operations against the Sandinista government."

"The allegations which we have heard are totally false," Shields said.

In a related development, the

House intelligence committee, according to staff sources, has begun looking into the allegations involving the 160th Task Force, an elite volunteer helicopter unit based at Ft. Campbell, Ky.

ONE FATHER said his son, a member of the unit, had ferried Spanish-speaking combatants into Nicaragua in 1982 and 1983. A widow and a cousin said their kin had spoken of task-force missions into hostile Central American territory but had been vague about the destinations.

The Army has reported that all three unit members died in helicopter accidents in 1983 unrelated to clandestine missions. The victims had told their relatives that the U.S. government would deny their involvement in clandestine missions if they were killed or downed while abroad.

—Frank Greve

Secret task force's 1983 accidents took 17 lives

Free Press Washington Staff

The Army's 160th Task Force lost 17 men in 1983, reportedly in these five incidents:

- At 5:05 p.m. March 20, 23 miles offshore of Norfolk, Va., a bolt and bushing gave way in the forward rotor transmission of a CH47C Chinook helicopter. The Chinook crashed into the Atlantic, killing the five crewmen on impact. They were the instructor pilot, Chief Warrant Officer 3C Ralph Thompson, 28, of Placerville, Calif.; the pilot, Chief Warrant Officer 2C Donald Alvey, 28, of Clarksville, Tenn.; the flight engineer, Specialist 4C Jerry Wilder, 22, of Franklin, Ohio; the crew chief, Specialist 4C Claude Dunn, 23, of Mathis, Tex., and the crew chief, Pfc. Gregory Bohner, 23, of Ogalala, Neb.

- Shortly after 11:40 p.m. July 10, near Traverse City, Mich., a low-flying, off-course Chinook headed into what was thought to be

a mass of gray fog. It was South Fox Island. Killed in the crash and fireball were the senior instructor pilot, Chief Warrant Officer 4C Larry Jones, 34, of Redding, Calif.; the copilot and trainee, Chief Warrant Officer 3C Thomas Croesen II, 28, of Falls Church, Va.; the navigator, Chief Warrant Officer 2C James Jensen, 23, of Newark, Ohio; the flight engineer, Staff Sgt. Luis Sanchez, 27, of Vega Alta, Puerto Rico; the crew chief, Sgt. Mark Cornwell, 28, of Colorado Springs, Colo., and Sgt. Mark Rietz, 30, of Oceanside, Calif.

- At 3:58 p.m. Aug. 28, at Ft. Campbell, Ky., loose pitch control bolts gave way on a UH60 Black Hawk in the midst of a maintenance check-out flight, causing the chopper's rotor blades to break off. The fuselage fell 100 feet and burned, killing the pilot, Capt. Robert Brannum, 28, of Knoxville, Tenn.; the copilot, Chief Warrant Officer 2C David Jordan, 27, of Jacksonville, Fla., and the main-

tenance technician, Chief Warrant Officer 1C Allen Jennings, 30, of Holden, La.

- About 10:10 p.m. Oct. 4, four miles north of Ft. Sherman, Panama, a pilot trainee practicing night-vision maneuvers and his instructor failed to notice that their UH60 Black Hawk was losing altitude rapidly. It crashed into the Atlantic, killing the instructor, Chief Warrant Officer 3C William Tuttle, 32, of Clarksville, Tenn., and the crew chief, Specialist 4C Richard Thompson, 23, of Donnellson, Iowa. The trainee and company commander, Maj. Larry Sloan, 37, of Clarksville, Tenn., suffered minor injuries.

- About 8:30 a.m. Oct. 25, a mile north of Point Salinas airport in Granada, A UH60 Black Hawk on a classified mission crashed into a low ridge. Killed by small-arms fire was Capt. Keith Lucas, 28, of Granite City, Ill., the pilot. Injured were Maj. Sloan, the company commander, and the gunner, Specialist 4C Lauren Richards, 28, of Clarksville, Tenn.

Secret U.S. Role in Central America

Dead soldiers' families tell of unit

DETROIT FREE PRESS

12/16/84

By FRANK GREVE and ELLEN WARREN
From Press Washington Staff

WASHINGTON — Members of a secret U.S. Army helicopter unit, wearing civilian clothes and flying at night, have ventured repeatedly into hostile territory in Central America to aid pro-American forces, according to relatives of unit members.

If downed or captured, the relatives said, the soldiers were told to expect no U.S. government acknowledgment or intervention; soldiers were instructed to blow up their CH47 Chinook and UH60 Black Hawk helicopters with explosive charges.

Then, using bribe money made available by their superiors and privately bought weapons of their choice, the soldiers were expected to buy or fight their way free, relatives said. Many were required to carry a major credit card with a line of credit of at least \$1,000, in part to pay airfare home.

THE UNIT is the 160th Task Force of the 101st Airborne Division stationed at Ft. Campbell, Ky. The Free Press Washington Bureau was told of the unit and its missions by widows, parents and friends of 16 task force members killed, reportedly in accidents. Relatives also discussed a 17th member they said was killed by small-arms fire in the U.S.-led invasion of Grenada in October 1983.

"We just don't talk about that unit," said Michael Burch, assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, when asked about reports that the 160th Task Force had been involved in Central American missions. However, he said, "To my

knowledge the unit has never deployed to Central America."

A CENTRAL AMERICAN mission in support of the Salvadoran government's war with leftist guerrillas could violate the War Powers Act. Missions in support of rebels attempting to overthrow Nicaragua's Sandinista regime would violate the congressional ban on the use of Defense Department appropriations to train, arm or otherwise support these rebel forces.

That prohibition, called the Boland amendment, was adopted in December 1982 and was aimed at ending the

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Reagan administration's so-called secret war against the Sandinistas.

"We are complying with the law," President Reagan said of the amendment during a news conference on April 14, 1983. "Anything that we are doing in that area is simply trying to interdict the supply lines which are supplying the guerrillas in El Salvador."

THE 160TH Task Force action in Central America, as described to the Free Press Washington Bureau, allegedly took place during 1982 and 1983, when a number of U.S. military and training maneuvers were held in the area. It was not possible to determine any of the unit's assignments during 1984.

The 400- to 800-member unit's 17 aircraft fatalities in 1983 — nearly half of the 35 aircraft deaths reported by the entire Army for that year — do not appear linked to clandestine missions in Central America.

But the father of Warrant Officer Donald Alvey, William Alvey of Morganfield, Ky., said, "Don told me that if he ever failed to return from one of these missions, the Army already had a story to make up for his and his crew's disappearance, and nobody would ever know the difference."

ACCORDING TO the Army, Donald Alvey, 26, was killed on March 26, 1983, when a Chinook helicopter he was piloting crashed 23 miles offshore of Norfolk, Va.

The elder Alvey's recollection jibes with that of Linda Jennings, 30, of Key West, Fla. She is the widow of Warrant Officer Allen Jennings, 26, reported by the Army to have died on Aug. 26, 1983, in a Black Hawk crash at Ft. Campbell.

"Everybody (in the unit) knew that if they were lost, nobody would know," Jennings said. "They knew that if they got grounded or caught, they were on their own."

A second woman widowed, reportedly in the Ft. Campbell crash, Brenda Jordan, said her husband, David, a warrant officer pilot, told her the same story days before his death.

Jordan, 32, of Tampa, Fla., said her husband told her, "If I ever die in an accident and they tell you I was a spy, or if I crash somewhere that I'm not supposed to be, don't ever believe that I was spying or wasn't working for the Army."

JUDY SCHARFMAN, 24, of West Point, Iowa, heard a similar story from her cousin, Specialist 4C Richard Thompson, 26, a Black Hawk crewman. The Army said Thompson was killed Oct. 4, 1983, in a crash four miles offshore of Colon, Panama. Scharfman said Thompson told her two weeks before his death that whatever happened to him, "the Army could pull whatever they wanted to make it look other ways."

Alvey, Jennings and Scharfman have never met or discussed the accidents in which their relatives were involved. Jennings and Jordan met after they were widowed.

The Free Press Washington Bureau got in contact with survivors of the 17 160th Task Force airmen who died in 1983. Most said they knew little about the unit's secret missions. Relatives of two airmen disputed accounts of Central American missions given by other relatives and friends. Current task force members would say almost nothing. Fines, imprisonment and loss of rank can result from breaches of security by military personnel.

"THAT'S IN the top-secret category, so I'm not going to talk about that," said one Army airmen who was asked about reports of task force Central American missions.

Another, just out of the unit, said, "I don't want to go to jail."

Only one person, Alvey, said a relative in the unit had discussed task force missions into Nicaragua. But several other relatives and friends of unit members said they had been told of ventures into unidentified "enemy" territory in Central America.

Asked whether U.S. Special Operations units had assisted Nicaragua's rebels, Neal Koch, principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, said "No, not to my knowledge." But Koch, the administration's appointee in charge of Special Operations forces, said, "It would not be unusual for things to be done that I would not know about."

Rep. Earl Hutto, D-Fla., chairman of a House Armed Services Committee panel on special operations forces, said he was unaware "of any participation by American forces in direct action against the guerrillas." He acknowledged that his panel had not investigated special operations missions in Central America.

CONGRESSIONAL sources familiar with clandestine military operations said the 160th Task Force was created from helicopter companies at Ft. Campbell in 1980 in response to the taking of U.S. Embassy hostages in Tehran. After the U.S. effort to free them was aborted because of Marine helicopter failures, the Army unit expanded dramatically.

The Task Force has an unusual chain of command, according to congressional sources familiar with its operations. Though located at Ft. Campbell and attached to the 101st Airborne, it does not report to the division's commander. Instead, it reports to the Joint Special Operations Command, created by the administration to oversee U.S. commando operations. The Joint Special Operations Command, in turn, reports directly to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

PENTAGON OFFICIALS said helicopter task force's missions include ferrying into action the Delta Force, the Army's elite anti-terrorism unit.

A second mission is to insert and extract individuals or small commando units involved in quick-strike, clandestine attacks behind enemy lines. The 160th Task Force played this role in the Grenada invasion, according to published remarks by Gen. Donald Keith, head of the U.S. Army Materiel Development and Readiness Command.

Highly trained task force pilots are specialists in flying at "tree-top level to evade radar. Because virtually all operations are conducted in darkness, the unit has adopted the nickname "Night Stalkers" and the motto "Death waits in the night."

The unit's "highly skilled volunteer aviators ... are probably the best helicopter pilots in the world today," the House Armed Services Committee was told in September

by Maj. Gen. William Moore, deputy chief of staff of the Army for operations and readiness.

DESPITE THE 160th Task Force's high fatality rate, it won the 1983 Outstanding Aviation Unit of the Year Award from the Army Aviation Association of America. In addition to supporting Ranger commando units involved in the Grenada invasion, "they've done an awful lot that we can't talk about here tonight," explained Gen. Keith, who presented the award.

Military regulations generally have barred U.S. units and advisers in Central America from combat and imminent combat. However, relatives said task force members were permitted to fire if fired on.

Relatives quoted the men as saying they were trained to use decoy flares to confound heat-seeking missiles. Black Hawk pilots also were trained to fly loops with their helicopters to evade and counter-attack falling enemy aircraft.

GILLIAN MAJOR, widow of Chief Warrant Officer Thomas Croman III, said he never talked about his missions. However, she dismissed the stories of clandestine operations as groundless boasting.

But the elder Alvey, a Kentucky cattleman and construction worker, said he had discussed several Nicaraguan missions with his son, Donald.

"Don flew a bunch of trips into Nicaragua" before his crash in March 1983, said his father. Most seemed to have occurred early in 1983 or late in 1982, the elder Alvey recalled, "almost as though Don had a new assignment."

"He was kind of vague about the missions," the father said. "He'd go somewhere and pick up a group of people in a clearing in the jungle — armed troops, speaking Spanish — and take them to another clearing in the jungle somewhere."

"HE DIDN'T know who they were or why they were going. His job was to fly them in, put them down, be gone six or eight hours, then put in the chopper again and take them back out."

The passengers usually would be picked up in Honduras and dropped off in Nicaragua, Alvey said. His son's Chinook then would return to Honduras until it was time to pick up passengers in Nicaragua.

These were not training exercises, Alvey said. "Don said one time you could tell damn well they had been in a fight because a lot of them were wounded."

The elder Alvey said his son had spoken of ferrying troops into Nicaragua from a ship offshore. Press reports in 1984 indicated that the CIA was using a so-called mother ship off Nicaragua's Pacific coast.

The mother ship was said to be home for small, fast, open-cockpit piranha boats equipped with machine guns. Six were provided to Honduras by the United States in 1982, according to Defense Department records. In recent years, such boats have become important naval craft in the region.

IN 1982 and 1983, U.S. Navy SEAL (Sea-Air-Land) commandos trained Salvadoran naval units to use piranha boats to stop gunrunning in the Gulf of Fonseca. That came to light in May 1983 when Salvadoran rebels in San Salvador assassinated the director of the training, U.S. Navy Lt. Cmdr. Albert Schaufelberger, 32, while he was waiting to pick up his girlfriend.

In September 1983, Daniel Ortega, co-ordinator for Nicaragua's ruling revolutionary junta, said saboteurs "trained and sent by the CIA" had used piranha boats to blow up underwater oil delivery pipelines and coastal oil storage tanks in the Pacific ports of Corinto and Puerto Sandino. U.S. officials later acknowledged CIA direction of the raids.

AT THE TIME of the raids, questions were raised about how Honduran-based saboteurs, who claimed credit for the missions, could reach Puerto Sandino, 80 miles south of their normal patrol zone, in piranha boats.

Donald Alvey may have known the answer. When he crashed offshore of Norfolk, his Chinook was carrying a piranha boat in its underbelly sling and practicing maneuvers involved in lowering the boat and its passengers into the water, said his father and two sources at Ft. Campbell familiar with the accident.